

Mortality of Soviet Prisoners of War in German Captivity during World War II

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Why Germany Invaded the Soviet Union

Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941 is widely interpreted by historians as an unprovoked act of aggression by Germany. Adolf Hitler is typically described as an untrustworthy liar who broke the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact he had signed with the Soviet Union. Historians usually depict Josef Stalin as an unprepared victim of Hitler's aggression who was foolish to have trusted Hitler.[\[1\]](#) Many historians think the Soviet Union was lucky to have survived Germany's attack.

This standard version of history does not incorporate information from the Soviet archives, which shows that the Soviet Union had amassed the largest and best equipped army in history. The Soviet Union was on the verge of launching a massive military offensive against all of Europe. Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union was a desperate preemptive attack that prevented the Soviet Union from conquering all of Europe. Germany was totally unprepared for a prolonged war against an opponent as powerful as the Soviet Union.

Viktor Suvorov, a former Soviet military-intelligence operative who defected to the United Kingdom in 1978, wrote a research paper titled "The Attack of Germany on the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941" while he was a student at the Soviet Army Academy. Suvorov explained his interest in the subject by saying he wanted to study how Germany prepared for the attack so that a horrible tragedy of this kind would never happen again. The topic of Suvorov's research was approved, and he was given access to closed Soviet archives.[\[2\]](#)

Suvorov discovered in the Soviet archives that the concentration of Soviet troops on the German border on June 22, 1941 was frightful. If Hitler had not invaded the Soviet Union, the Soviet Union would have easily conquered all of Europe. German intelligence correctly saw the massive concentration of Soviet forces on the German border, but it did not see all of the Soviet military preparations. The real picture was much graver even than Germany realized. The Red Army in June 1941 was the largest and most-powerful army in the history of the world.[\[3\]](#)

Suvorov writes in his book *The Chief Culprit* that Hitler launched his invasion of the Soviet Union without making reasonable preparations for the invasion. Hitler realized that he had no choice but to invade the Soviet Union. If Hitler had waited for Stalin to attack, all of Europe would have been lost.[\[4\]](#)

Suvorov also writes that both German and Soviet forces were positioned for attack on June 22, 1941. The position of the divisions of the Red Army and the German army on the border mirrored each other. The airfields of both armies were moved all the way up to the border. From the defensive point of view, this kind of deployment of troops and airfields by both armies was suicidal. Whichever army attacked first would be able to easily encircle the troops of the other army. Hitler attacked first to enable German troops to trap and encircle the best units of the Red Army.[\[5\]](#)

The German army quickly captured millions of Soviet soldiers after its invasion of the Soviet Union. Hitler soon looked for help in feeding these captured Soviet POWs.

Stalin's Betrayal of Soviet POWs

The Soviet Union was not a party to The Hague Conventions. Nor was the Soviet Union a signatory of the Geneva Convention of 1929, which defined more precisely the conditions to be accorded to POWs. Germany nevertheless approached the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) immediately after war broke out with the Soviet Union to attempt to regulate the conditions of prisoners on both sides. The ICRC contacted Soviet ambassadors in London and Sweden, but the Soviet leaders in Moscow refused to cooperate. Germany also sent lists of their Russian prisoners to the Soviet government until September 1941. The German government eventually stopped sending these lists in response to the Soviet Union's continued refusal to reciprocate.[\[6\]](#)

Over the winter Germany made further efforts to establish relations with the Soviets in an attempt to introduce the provisions of The Hague and Geneva Conventions concerning POWs. Germany was rebuffed again. Hitler himself made an appeal to Stalin for prisoners' postal services and urged Red Cross inspection of the camps. Stalin responded: "There are no Russian prisoners of war. The Russian soldier fights on till death. If he chooses to become a prisoner, he is automatically excluded from the Russian community. We are not interested in a postal service only for Germans."[\[7\]](#)

British historian Robert Conquest confirmed that Stalin adamantly refused to cooperate with repeated German attempts to reach mutual agreement on the treatment of POWs by Germany and the Soviet Union. Conquest wrote:

When the Germans approached the Soviets, through Sweden, to negotiate observance of the provisions of the Geneva Convention on prisoners of war, Stalin refused. The Soviet soldiers in German hands were thus unprotected even in theory. Millions of them died in captivity, through malnutrition or maltreatment. If Stalin had adhered to the convention (to which the USSR had not been a party) would the Germans have behaved better? To judge by their treatment of other "Slav submen" POWs (like the Poles, even surrendering after the Warsaw Rising), the answer seems to be yes. (Stalin's own behavior to [Polish] prisoners captured by the Red Army had already been demonstrated at Katyn and elsewhere. German prisoners captured by the Soviets over the next few years were mainly sent to forced labor camps.)[\[8\]](#)

The ICRC soon became aware of the Soviet government's callous abandonment of their soldiers who fell into German hands. In August 1941, Hitler permitted a Red Cross delegation to visit the German camp for Soviet POWs at Hammerstadt. As a result of this visit, the Red Cross requested that the Soviet government permit the delivery of food parcels to the Soviet POWs. The Soviet government adamantly refused. It replied that sending food in this situation and under fascist control was the same as making presents to the enemy.[\[9\]](#)

In February 1942, the ICRC told Molotov that Great Britain had given permission for the Soviet Union to buy food for captured Soviet prisoners in her African colonies. Also, the Canadian Red Cross was offering a gift of 500 vials of vitamins, and Germany had agreed to collective consignments of food for POWs. The Red Cross reported: "All these offers and communications from the ICRC to the Soviet authorities remained unanswered, either directly or indirectly." All other appeals by the ICRC and parallel negotiations undertaken by neutral or friendly nations met with no better response.[\[10\]](#)

The Soviet refusals to accept aid came as a surprise to the Red Cross, which had not read Stalin's Order No. 270 published on August 16, 1941. This order stated in regard to captured Soviet POWs:

If...instead of organizing resistance to the enemy, some Red Army men prefer to surrender, they shall be destroyed by all possible means, both ground-based and from the air, whereas the families of the Red Army men who have been taken prisoner shall be deprived of the state allowance and relief.

The commanders and political officers...“who surrender to the enemy shall be considered malicious deserters, whose families are liable to be arrested [the same] as the families of deserters who have violated the oath and betrayed their Motherland.”[\[11\]](#)

Order No. 270 reveals Stalin's great hatred for Soviet soldiers captured by German forces. It also reveals the danger to innocent children and relatives of Soviet POWs. Hundreds of thousands of Russian women and children were murdered simply because their father or son had been taken prisoner. Given Stalin's attitude, the German leaders resolved to treat Soviet prisoners no better than the Soviet leaders were treating captured German prisoners.[\[12\]](#)

Mortality of Soviet POWs

The result was disastrous for surrendered Russian soldiers in German camps. Captured Red Army soldiers had to endure long marches from the field of battle to the camps. Prisoners who were wounded, sick, or exhausted were sometimes shot on the spot. When Soviet prisoners were transported by train, the Germans usually used open freight cars with no protection from the weather. The camps also often provided no shelter from the elements, and the food ration was typically below survival levels. As a result, Russian POWs died in large numbers in German camps. Many Russian survivors of the German camps described them as “pure hell.”[\[13\]](#)

One German officer described the conditions for captured Soviet POWs in the German camps:

The abject misery in the prisoner-of-war camps had now passed all bounds. In the countryside one could come across ghost-like figures, ashen grey, starving, half naked, living perhaps for days on end on corpses and the bark of trees...I visited a prison camp near Smolensk where the daily death rate reached hundreds. It was the same in transit camps, in villages, along the roads. Only some quite unprecedented effort could check the appalling death toll.[\[14\]](#)

By one estimate, 5,754,000 Russians surrendered to German forces during World War II, of whom 3.7 million died in captivity.[\[15\]](#) Another source estimates that 3.1 million Soviet POWs died in German captivity. The starvation of Russian soldiers in German camps stiffened the resistance of the Red Army, since soldiers would rather fight to the death than starve in agony as German captives. As knowledge of German policies spread, Timothy Snyder writes that some Soviet citizens began to think that Soviet control of their country was preferable to German control.[\[16\]](#)

The death of millions of Russian POWs in German captivity constitutes one of the major war crimes of the Second World War. However, much of the blame for the terrible fate of these Soviet soldiers was due to the inflexibly cruel policies of Joseph Stalin. A major portion of the Soviet POWs who died from hunger could have been saved had Stalin not called them traitors and denied them the right to live. By preventing the ICRC from distributing food to the Soviet POWs in German captivity, Stalin needlessly caused the death of a large percentage of these Soviet POWs.[\[17\]](#)

A Red Army sergeant who was captured by the Germans when he was dug out unconscious from the ruins of Odessa later joined Gen. Andrei Vlasov's Russian Liberation Army. The sergeant, who had been decorated twice, bitterly complained of the Soviet Union's betrayal of its POWs:

You think, Captain, that we sold ourselves to the Germans for a piece of bread? Tell me, why did the Soviet Government forsake us? Why did it forsake millions of prisoners? We saw prisoners of all nationalities, and they were taken care of. Through the Red Cross they received parcels and letters from home; only the Russians received nothing. In Kassel I saw American Negro prisoners, and they shared their cakes and chocolates with us. Then why didn't the Soviet Government, which we considered our own, send us at least some plain hard tack?... Hadn't we fought? Hadn't we defended the Government? Hadn't we fought for our country? If Stalin refused to have anything to do with us, we didn't want to have anything to do with Stalin![\[18\]](#)

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn also complained of the shameful betrayal of Soviet soldiers by the Russian Motherland. Solzhenitsyn wrote:

The first time she betrayed them was on the battlefield, through ineptitude...The second time they were heartlessly betrayed by the Motherland was when she abandoned them to die in captivity. And the third time they were unscrupulously betrayed was when, with motherly love, she coaxed them to return home, with such phrases as "The Motherland has forgiven you! The Motherland calls you!" and snared them the moment they reached the frontiers. It would appear that during the one thousand one hundred years of Russia's existence as a state there have been, ah, how many foul and terrible deeds! But among them was there ever so multimillioned foul a deed as this: to betray one's own soldiers and proclaim them traitors?[\[19\]](#)

Repatriation of Soviet POWs

Stalin's hatred of Soviet former POWs continued after the war. Stalin publicly warned that "in Hitler's camps there are no Russian prisoners of war, only Russian traitors and we shall do away with them when the war is over." Stalin's position was supported at the Yalta Conference in February 1945, where Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill both agreed to repatriate "without exception and by force if necessary" all former Soviet POWs.[\[20\]](#)

Many of the Soviet prisoners who were to be repatriated to the Soviet Union after the war begged to be shot on the spot rather than be delivered into the hands of the Soviet NKVD. Other Soviet prisoners committed suicide so as not to be tortured and executed by the Soviets. A shock force of 500 American and Polish guards was required at Dachau to forcibly repatriate the first group of Soviet prisoners to the Soviet Union. What followed is described in a report submitted to Robert Murphy:

Conforming to agreements with the Soviets, an attempt was made to entrain 399 former Russian soldiers who had been captured in German uniform, from the assembly center at Dachau on Saturday, January 19 [1946].

All of these men refused to entrain. They begged to be shot. They resisted entrainment by taking off their clothing and refusing to leave their quarters. It was necessary to use tear-gas and some force to drive them out. Tear-gas forced them out of the building into the snow where those who had cut and stabbed themselves fell exhausted and bleeding in the snow. Nine men hanged themselves and one had stabbed himself to death and one other who had stabbed himself subsequently died; while 20 others are still in

the hospital from self-inflicted wounds. The entrainment was finally effected of 368 men who were set off accompanied by a Russian liaison officer on a train carrying American guards. Six men escaped en route...[\[21\]](#)

The report ended: “The incident was shocking. There is considerable dissatisfaction on the part of the American officers and men that they are being required by the American Government to repatriate these Russians...”[\[22\]](#) Thus, for most Soviet POWs, being shot in a German concentration camp was preferable to being tortured and executed on their return to the Soviet Union.

A number of Soviet POWs held in British camps also committed suicide rather than being repatriated to the Soviet Union. The British Foreign Office carefully concealed the forced repatriations of Soviet POWs from the British public in order to avoid a scandal.[\[23\]](#)

Soviet POWs held at Fort Dix, New Jersey also resorted to desperate measures when informed they were to be repatriated to the Soviet Union. The Russian POWs barricaded themselves inside their barracks. Many of the Soviet POWs committed suicide, while other Soviet POWs were killed fighting the American soldiers attempting to take them to the ship bound for the USSR. The surviving Soviet POWs stated that only the prompt use of tear gas by the Americans prevented the entire group of 154 Soviet POWs from committing suicide.[\[24\]](#)

Conclusion

American historian Timothy Snyder writes: “After Hitler betrayed Stalin and ordered the invasion of the Soviet Union, the Germans starved the Soviet prisoners of war...”[\[25\]](#)

Snyder incorrectly states that Hitler betrayed Stalin. Hitler’s preemptive invasion of the Soviet Union prevented Stalin from conquering all of Europe. Hitler’s attack was not for *Lebensraum* or any other malicious reason. This is why volunteers from 30 nations enlisted to fight in the German armed forces during World War II.[\[26\]](#) These volunteers knew that the Soviet Union, which Viktor Suvorov calls “the most criminal and most bloody empire in human history,”[\[27\]](#) could not be allowed to conquer all of Europe.

Snyder also fails to recognize that a major portion of the Soviet POWs who died in German captivity could have been saved had Stalin not called them traitors and denied them the right to live. Stalin prevented the ICRC from distributing food to the Soviet POWs held in German captivity, thereby needlessly causing the deaths of many of these Soviet POWs. Many Soviet POWs who survived German captivity were also brutally tortured and murdered by Stalin when they were repatriated to the Soviet Union after the war.

Notes

[\[1\]](#) For example, see Snyder, Timothy, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, New York: Basic Books, 2010, p. xi.

[\[2\]](#) Suvorov, Viktor, *The Chief Culprit: Stalin’s Grand Design to Start World War II*, Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2008, pp. xviii-xix.

[\[3\]](#) *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 249-250.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. xx.

[6] Tolstoy, Nikolai, *Victims of Yalta: The Secret Betrayal of the Allies 1944-1947*, New York and London: Pegasus Books, 1977, pp. 33-34.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 34.

[8] Conquest, Robert, *Stalin: Breaker of Nations*, New York: Viking Penguin, 1991, p. 241.

[9] Teplyakov, Yuri, "Stalin's War against His Own Troops: The Tragic Fate of Soviet Prisoners of War in German Captivity," *The Journal of Historical Review*, Vol. 14, No. 4, July/Aug. 1994, p. 6.

[10] Tolstoy, Nikolai, *Victims of Yalta: The Secret Betrayal of The Allies 1944-1947*, New York and London: Pegasus Books, 1977, p. 55.

[11] Teplyakov, Yuri, "Stalin's War against His Own Troops: The Tragic Fate of Soviet Prisoners of War in German Captivity," *The Journal of Historical Review*, Vol. 14, No. 4, July/Aug. 1994, pp. 4, 6.

[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

[13] Snyder, Timothy, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, New York: Basic Books, 2010, pp. 176-177, 179.

[14] Strik-Strikfeldt, Wilfried, *Against Stalin and Hitler: Memoir of the Russian Liberation Movement 1941-5*, London: Macmillan, 1970, pp. 49-50.

[15] Tolstoy, Nikolai, *Victims of Yalta: The Secret Betrayal of the Allies 1944-1947*, New York and London: Pegasus Books, 1977, p. 35.

[16] Snyder, Timothy, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, New York: Basic Books, 2010, p. 184.

[17] Teplyakov, Yuri, "Stalin's War against His Own Troops: The Tragic Fate of Soviet Prisoners of War in German Captivity," *The Journal of Historical Review*, Vol. 14, No. 4, July/Aug. 1994, p. 6.

[18] Tolstoy, Nikolai, *Victims of Yalta: The Secret Betrayal of the Allies 1944-1947*, New York and London: Pegasus Books, 1977, p. 41.

[19] Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr I., *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation* (Vol. 1) New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1974, p. 240.

[20] Tzouliadis, Tim, *The Forsaken: An American Tragedy in Stalin's Russia*, New York: The Penguin Press, 2008, p. 244.

[21] Tolstoy, Nikolai, *Victims of Yalta: The Secret Betrayal of The Allies 1944-1947*, New York and London: Pegasus Books, 1977, pp. 354-355.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 355.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 21.

[24] *Ibid.*, pp. 325-326.

[25] Snyder, Timothy, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, New York: Basic Books, 2010, p. 380.

[26] Todor, Richard, *Hitler's Revolution*, Chicago: 2013, p. 7.

[27] Suvorov, Viktor, *The Chief Culprit: Stalin's Grand Design to Start World War II*, Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2008, p. 58.

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